



March 9, 2011

### Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 207

Chairman Hansen and members of the Committee:

Protecting &  
Advancing  
America's  
Heritage  
of Hunting,  
Fishing &  
Trapping.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB 207, the Hunter Heritage Bill. My name is Jeremy Rine and I am the Associate Director of State Services and an on-staff attorney with the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance. Founded in 1978, the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance is the nation's premier organization protecting and advancing the rights of American sportsmen.

I am also submitting testimony on behalf of the Families Afield partners. In 2004, Families Afield was established by the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance, the National Shooting Sports Foundation, and the National Wild Turkey Federation in order to bring a new generation of sportsmen to the field. Recently, the National Rifle Association and the National Assembly of Sportsmen Caucuses joined Families Afield with the common goal of reducing barriers to hunting for the purpose of increasing hunter recruitment and retention rates. Since the program's inception, Families Afield legislation has been passed in 30 states, including in Michigan, with more than a half million new hunters taking to the field as a result.

Families Afield was developed to address the need to increase declining hunter recruitment and retention rates across the country. Today's hunting population is aging and fewer youth are being introduced to the outdoors and conservation. If this trend continues, not only will the future of hunting be at risk but also the future of states' ability to manage and conserve wildlife populations. Not only is hunting one of the best tools that states have for managing wildlife populations but hunters overwhelmingly float the bill for wildlife conservation across the country by paying for hunting licenses and by paying excise taxes on purchases of hunting equipment. This money is the primary financial driver for conservation across the country.

Furthermore, hunting is a major economic driver for the state. In Michigan, hunting directly brings in \$3.4 billion to the state each year, with an additional \$5.9 billion in economic ripple effect. Hunting supports 46,000 jobs and accounts for \$378 million in state and local tax revenue.

The "Hunter Heritage Bill" addresses two vital needs in Michigan. First, it addresses Michigan's need to recruit and retain new hunters. It does this by eliminating the arbitrarily set minimum hunting age in Michigan and allows parents to decide when their child is mature enough to go hunting. The bill allows youth to be introduced to, and become excited about, hunting at a young age, before they are too busy with other activities. Second, and most importantly, the bill requires these new hunters to hunt under a mentored youth hunting program established by the NRC. This ensures that these new hunters can *safely* try hunting under the watchful eye of an experienced adult mentor.

By the time youth reach Michigan's current legal hunting age they are already involved in many different activities which they have likely been doing for many years. Sports, music lessons, club meetings, and video games leave little time for youth to try hunting. This leads to lower hunting recruitment and retention rates.

Research shows that nearly 80% of all hunters reported that their first hunting experience was between the ages of 6 and 15. It also shows that hunters who started hunting in their youth are more likely to keep hunting throughout their life than those who first started hunting as an adult. With this information, it is no surprise that states with more restrictions on youth hunting have the lowest hunter replacement ratios.

Overall, when youth cannot experience hunting at a young age they are much less likely to become a hunter, let alone a lifelong hunter.

Importantly, this bill introduces new hunters to the field in a safe and controlled environment. It requires all youth under the age of 10 to hunt under a newly established "mentored youth hunting program" run by the NRC and requires that these youth hunt under the watchful eye of an experienced adult mentor who is at least 21 years old.

***Our research has shown that hunters accompanied by an experienced mentor are seven times safer than the general hunting population.*** It also shows that states without a minimum hunting age have hunting incident rates slightly lower than those states that have minimum hunting ages.

Under the bill, when these new youth get to experience the excitement of hunting they will do so only while accompanied by an experienced adult mentor who will ensure that the youth hunts safely and who will be able to teach the youth how to be a safe hunter.

This will help instill the characteristics of a safe hunter in these youth as they move on to take the required hunter education course and become lifelong hunters and conservationists.

Additionally, it is important to note that the bill does not do away with Michigan's hunter education requirement. Mentored hunting, like that established by this bill for youth under 10 and Michigan's current apprentice license available to all other ages, is designed to be a driver toward hunter education. A vital component advocated in all Families Afield legislation that has passed has been the requirement that in order to become a fully licensed hunter you must pass a hunter education course.

In summary, Michigan has historically had one of the lowest hunter retention rates in the nation. Senate Bill 207 is necessary to help Michigan increase hunter recruitment and retention while ensuring that hunting remains safe.

The U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance would like to sincerely thank Senator Hune for recognizing the need for Michigan to take these necessary steps to increase hunter recruitment and retention in the state by opening new opportunities for youth to safely enjoy the hunting opportunities that Michigan has to offer.

USSA would also like to thank the Michigan United Conservation Clubs for their hard work on this issue and their dedication to the future of hunting in Michigan.

Thank you again for allowing USSA and its Families Afield partners the opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB 207 and I hope that you will support continuing Michigan's great hunting heritage by supporting this bill.